CENTERING BLACK VOICES

Lessons from a 2–Year Pilot Program in the Kansas City Region

Summary

In 2021, REACH Healthcare Foundation introduced Centering Black Voices, a two-year pilot program developed to improve racial equity. The program's primary goal was to reduce the philanthropic funding gap experienced by Black-led nonprofit organizations that are working to meet the most urgent health and social development needs in their communities. Centering Black Voices provided unrestricted funding to a group of Black-led nonprofit organizations, along with access to consultants and a community of practice for Black leaders to share and learn from each other. The program was implemented across REACH's service area of six counties in Kansas and Missouri.

Lessons learned from the pilot program informed new extensions of the work, expanded the foundation's understanding of how to provide meaningful coaching and technical assistance, and reinforced the actions and behaviors a funder can implement to build trust.

Together, these lessons can be applied to effectively support social change. Centering Black Voices evolved from REACH's increased awareness of inequities in its grantmaking practices, our desire to repair relationships with Black nonprofit leaders, and our intention to remedy internal processes that create barriers to funding.

Arriving at a Starting Point

This leadership and capacity development effort took shape in response to a REACH Foundation leadership goal of examining racial equity within our service area. Begun as a pilot, Centering Black Voices is a focused effort to rethink our approach to how we support Black-led and Black-serving nonprofit organizations in their efforts to meet the most urgent needs within the communities they serve.

A series of conversations with Black nonprofit leaders in the Kansas City area took place over two years. The dialogue surfaced concerns and, in some instances, direct criticism that philanthropy was overlooking Black leaders as experts in their respective fields. Additional criticism was that funders, including REACH, were maintaining grantmaking practices that made it difficult for Black-led nonprofits to gain access to funders and resources.

Health disparities and racial inequities are caused by many factors, but racism (e.g., systemic, structural) is the most prevalent (Bell & Lee, 2011). Individual behaviors, relationships, institutions, policies, and culture can all reinforce racism. The result is disparities in many systems—including health care, criminal justice, education, and employment—that produce notable differences in outcomes between Black people and White people.

National studies and conversations about these disparities have called out philanthropy's long-standing underinvestment in Black-led organizations, which has been described as "philanthropic redlining." Like neighborhood redlining, which was designed to limit home ownership by restricting access to capital and housing loans, philanthropic redlining is a racist practice at the institutional level that sets up barriers to philanthropic organizations and funding (Scott et al., 2020). These barriers result in a disparity in the resources provided to Black-led organizations compared with those provided to White-led organizations (Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity, n.d.). This version

of redlining can involve intentionally or unintentionally blocking access to resources held by philanthropic institutions via their own policies and rules.

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For several years, REACH has been pursuing opportunities to increase its investments and partnerships within historically marginalized communities. We have long upheld a commitment to general operating grants, which are a tool for supporting the infrastructure at nonprofit organizations. REACH has made multiple investments in immigrant and refugee health, including formation of a learning network called **Communities Concerned for Immigrants and Refugees** as well as a regional effort promoting racial equity and a sense of belonging for immigrants and refugees called **Welcoming KC**.

Furthermore, REACH created a learning and training initiative called the **Cultural Competency Collective KC**. This initiative aims to strengthen cultural competency, diversity, and inclusion in the health and human services sector of the Kansas City region. Despite these and other investments, however, Black nonprofit leaders reported feeling that their organizations and community efforts were being ignored.

Designing the Centering Black Voices Program

Drawing from one-on-one interviews with Black leaders in health and human services, we identified three areas where Black-led nonprofits had been negatively affected by REACH's policies and practices:

1.) Underfunding of core operating needs.
2.) Lack of timely access to capacity building.
3.) Limited opportunities for leadership development and professional growth.

In response, REACH contracted with a Kansas City-based project consultant to help our staff analyze the interview feedback. The consultant also helped REACH design a learning process for our leaders to reflect on

the foundation's policies and resulting actions in underfunding Black-led and Black-serving nonprofit organizations in our service region.

With support from REACH's board of directors, staff developed and operationalized an action plan to pinpoint practices that have contributed to philanthropic redlining. This work coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic and then national and community calls for racial justice, adding urgency to our efforts. By the end of 2020, REACH staff—along with a community-based consultant and a small advisory group of REACH board members—outlined a set of practices and specific strategies aimed at repairing some of the past harms.

The first piece in the plan was Centering Black Voices, a strategy to support Black leaders of primarily Black-serving nonprofits through unrestricted grants, professional learning opportunities, and technical assistance. The central aim of this pilot program was to reduce barriers to funding and provide personalized coaching and technical assistance based on the expressed needs of grantees. In taking a "listening first" approach and relaxing some of the foundation's traditional grantmaking requirements, REACH hoped to begin to repair harm and lessen the distrust that exists due to years of underinvestment.

Centering Black Voices marked the beginning of an evolution in REACH's approach to philanthropy. Our new approach centered around the goals and expertise of Black leaders who are working to address health disparities and improve racial equity in their communities. Each of the nine leaders in the pilot received a $20,000 general support grant for their organization. We invited each leader to help define the leadership and organizational development they most needed. In addition to general support funds, we offered resources to each organization for professional development of executive leadership or staff.

Additionally, REACH identified consultants who could advise Black leaders on program efforts and provide any requested technical assistance. Concurrently, REACH staff continuously gathered feedback from the grantees and other leaders in the Black community to improve the program. That input, along with other community engagement efforts, informed the program offerings in the second year.

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Today, Centering Black Voices is a multifaceted initiative aimed to advance Black-led social change. REACH continues to provide general operating support and foster a growing community of practice among Black-led, Black-serving organizations in the Kansas City region. We continue to be dedicated to discussing, listening, and relationship-building in our service area to gain insights into where resources are needed. REACH's overall grantmaking strategies continue to evolve, with more focused efforts on reparative philanthropy.

Identifying Essential Roles

Cultivating a healthy collaboration that encompasses REACH, the program grantees, and the external consultants was crucial to achieving the pilot's aim of reducing health disparities and advancing racial equity. REACH provided financial resources and other types of support. The participating nonprofits brought invaluable knowledge and expertise regarding the health needs of the community. Consultants played a role not only in providing technical guidance and building capacity support for nonprofits but also in building trust with philanthropy. Centering Black Voices demonstrated how each partner in this effort contributed to stronger relationships, increased knowledge, and more equitable outcomes.

REACH Healthcare Foundation

As the funder, REACH provided general operating support and other nonfinancial assistance. We simplified our application requirements, awarded capacity grants for specific project needs beyond the core support, and provided access to an external project consultant for coaching and guidance. We also allocated resources to initiate a community of practice for grantees and other Black professionals to promote collaboration and knowledge-sharing in the community. And lastly, REACH budgeted a small pool of funds for individual coaching and professional development needs identified by participating organization leaders.

Pilot Participants

Grantees for Centering Black Voices were selected based on program focus and development, capacity needs, alignment with REACH's mission, and readiness to take advantage of the offered program supports. With help from the primary consultant, REACH's Vice President of Programs curated a list of Black-led, Black-serving nonprofit organizations within the Kansas City region. Next, interviews with organization leaders were scheduled in lieu of a written application. During the interviews, the leaders were invited to discuss challenges or limitations preventing their nonprofits from achieving their goals. Additionally, leaders were asked to speak to their readiness to invest time in professional development, learning from others, and change management at their organizations.

The organizations selected for the Centering Black Voices pilot program include:

- **Ad Hoc Group Against Crime**, founded in 1977, provides support to individuals, families, and communities that have been affected by violence. *www.adhocgroupkc.org*

- **BlaqOut**, a grassroots movement to end HIV/AIDS, works to eliminate discrimination and mistrust of the medical community, and promote health and well-being among Black LGBTQ+ community members. *www.blaqout.org*

- **Food Equality Initiative** fights for nutrition security and health equity by increasing access to nourishing food as medicine for those at the intersection of food insecurity and diet-treated illness. *www.foodequalityinitiative.org*

- **KC Mothers in Charge** formed in 2013 in response to the original founder's experience of losing a child to gun violence. The organization aims to reduce violent crime through prevention, education, and intervention—and to support families that have lost a loved one. *www.kcmothersincharge.org*

- **Lyrik's Institution** is a cognitive-based program that helps youth a) understand destructive mental and behavioral approaches to community stress and trauma and b) develop behavioral skills and practices that support healthy behaviors. The program aims to reduce crime and violence. *www.lyriksinstitute.com*

- **Shirley's Kitchen Cabinet** is a nonpartisan organization dedicated to amplifying the voices and power of Black women through education and advocacy so that they can effectively elevate issues and influence policy that can benefit Black women and other people. *www.shirleyskitchencabinet.org*

- **The Transition Academy** was founded by a parent who saw a need for resources and assistance for students with disabilities to explore college and employment options after high school. *www.thetransitionacademy.org*

- **Uzazi Village** supports education, empowerment, and programming for Black and Brown women, with the aim of eliminating health disparities in maternal and infant health in their communities. *www.uzazivillage.org*

- **Village Initiative, Inc.** helps formerly incarcerated individuals obtain mentoring, job training, and other resources to reintegrate into society. *www.villageinitiativeinc.com*

External Consultants

Consultants played key roles in supporting leaders and their organizations. REACH identified:

1.) A project consultant in the Kansas City region to provide customized, culturally appropriate technical assistance and leadership coaching, and lead the community of practice. This consultant worked closely with REACH staff, board members and grantees, providing expert advice, thought leadership, and other deliverables associated with the pilot.

2.) A national strategy, learning, and evaluation consultant with expertise in systems change to help REACH formulate a theory of change. This consultant also worked remotely with the leaders to come up with milestones and an achievable timeline.

Creating a Community of Practice

In Year 1 of the pilot, we introduced the concept of a community of practice to engage Black leaders as co-creators in establishing the culture, norms, and offerings for grantees. Gatherings were designed to be safe, fun, and informative. This time and space provided grantees and other Black nonprofit leaders—on an individual and collective level—an opportunity to:

- **Connect:** Offer Black professionals opportunities to expand their networks, make connections and learn from other Black leaders. Gatherings included music, food, and games to celebrate Black culture and the Black lived experience.
- **Learn:** Explore new ways to expand capacity, skills, leadership, expertise, innovation, and knowledge. Activities included workshops (e.g., board governance, succession planning), peer coaching, and pop-up events to pitch ideas.
- **Grow:** Create one-on-one and small group sessions to help leaders apply knowledge and expertise to specific challenges within Black-led organizations. Technical assistance and individualized capacity-building support was available for leaders and teams to maximize performance.

Applying Lessons Learned

Over the course of the two-year pilot, the evaluation and learning consultant conducted assessments to help test the theory of change. Assessments were structured to answer two fundamental questions:

1.) What is necessary for the REACH Foundation to support Black leaders and Black-led organizations in ways that can help repair and strengthen relationships, address power imbalances, and recognize the expertise within these Black leaders so that they are better equipped to achieve positive change in their organizations and communities?

2.) What kind of changes are possible for Black leaders and Black-serving organizations when a foundation engages in reparative philanthropy and centers Black voices in the development of a grantmaking initiative?

The assessment process modeled reciprocal accountability, in which REACH is accountable to both the communities they support and to the foundation's stated commitments to racial equity. Taking away foundation-directed mandates, participation in assessments was voluntary and grantees were not required to collect additional data. Data gathering comprised focus groups with participants in Year 1 and Year 2, interviews conducted by REACH staff and consultants, observations from the project consultant, and additional interviews conducted by the evaluation and learning consultant.

This assessment data provided important insights on priorities and opportunities for growth that prompted additional components to the Centering Black Voices investment. Moreover, the resulting insights added crucial information to discussions by REACH board members and staff about the foundation's evolving approach to reparative grantmaking.

Importance of Unrestricted Funds

As a result of research and reflection, foundations nationally have documented the benefits of unrestricted funding to improving the performance and stability of nonprofits (Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, 2014). Along with enabling more effective management, participants in Centering Black Voices identified unrestricted funding as an important marker of foundation trust in the expertise, leadership, and vision of the nonprofit leaders. Grantees reported funders typically exert high levels of control over their organizations by a) scrutinizing budget decisions and b) restricting grants to priorities and strategies funders deem most important.

Grantees gave the Centering Black Voices pilot program high marks for allowing grantees greater say in how they participated. We hope that our approach—including the unrestricted funds—contributes to greater organizational strength, stability, growth, and autonomy for the grantee organizations.

Limitations of One-Year Funding

Grantees reported that Black-led organizations experience more variability in revenue. This observation is supported by research; a literature review concludes that Black-led organizations are less likely to receive multiyear grants in general, limiting their ability to invest in staffing or other assets that require a more stable revenue stream. A major portion of the new funding granted to Black-led social change groups comes from short-term or discretionary pools rather than from regular, institution-based funding pools (ABFE, 2019).

Several grantees reported that they typically receive bursts of funding from philanthropy and individual donors following high-profile racial injustice crises, but that interest in Black-led, racial equity-focused efforts tends to return to original (reduced) funding patterns after a time. In response to these patterns, organizations in the Centering Black Voices pilot received unrestricted funding for two years, with the goal of shifting some of those organizations into REACH's core operating partners portfolio. Grantees reported that the multiyear commitment offered stability to their budgets, improving their capacity to build on their work and plan for sustainable growth.

Benefiting From Quick Access to Small Grants

Grantees cited the option to receive a small one-time grant for specific capacity-building needs or professional development as being of high value relative to the cost. This type of funding opened opportunities that organizations could not have pursued otherwise, grantees noted. Organizations reported having little flexibility to maneuver within tightly constrained budgets. Restricted funding—combined with high levels of funder direction over use of funds—can hinder flexibility and prevent organizations from seizing opportunities (e.g., attending a conference or training, purchasing professional services). Although the one-time grants were a modest amount, leaders who received them reported the funds helped them implement ideas and improve the quality of their work.

Adding Value With Culturally Responsive Coaching

Participants uniformly reported that the culturally responsive approach to technical assistance offered by the external consultant held greater value than other assistance they had received through prior grants. The project consultant, who is a Black professional, was viewed as a thought partner who reinforced their expertise and leadership. Recipients of the consultant's support commented that the consultant's shared cultural perspective and lived experience of systemic racism fostered more authentic and useful conversations. In addition, grantees appreciated the opportunity to set their own priorities for technical assistance and tailor the assistance for their specific needs versus a one-size-fits-all, funder-defined approach.

Building Trust and Offering Autonomy

Some leaders didn't take advantage of the technical assistance and coaching resources that we offered—or they waited until close to the end of the initiative—due to a lack of understanding or misperception about what help was being offered. Those who accepted the technical assistance knew the external project consultant from the community and thus were more ready to engage with her.

What we learned from this is that one-time or even one-year investments seem less likely to result in a capacity-building relationship than longer-term relationships where the parties have more time for trust to be established. Centering Black Voices reinforced a long-standing principle at REACH that participation in a foundation-supported community of practice or the use of foundation-engaged consultants should never be mandatory for grantees. In

alignment with this principle, pilot participants reported that their ability to access the technical assistance when and how they saw fit was essential to their sense of autonomy. For effective coaching and technical assistance, we learned that the grantees wanted to determine how best to use these optional resources.

Combining Supports Leads to Optimal Results

Participants were asked to identify organizational improvements that they believe resulted from their engagement in Centering Black Voices. In all, eight of nine organizations reported capacity and infrastructure improvements in at least one area, and several reported improvements in more than one area:

- Process infrastructure (e.g., strategic planning, implementation planning and management, case management systems).
- Staff capacity and relationships.
- Governance practices.
- Ability to leverage additional funding from other funders.
- Monitoring and evaluation practices.
- Program growth.

Participants noted that these benefits derived primarily from the direct technical assistance; coaching support and structured learning opportunities with the external consultants; and the space and time to share knowledge, ideas, tools, and insights with one another.

Healing for Black Leaders

The proposed initial design of the Centering Black Voices pilot included regular meetings as a community of practice to learn how to address common nonprofit challenges (e.g., board development, leadership succession planning, financial issues, evaluation). After a few planning sessions, the team realized that this approach replicated conventional, White-dominant nonprofit norms (Okun, 2001) and left little space for building trust and relationships. The community of practice, instead, deliberately prioritized self-care, connection, and celebration—which participants deemed important for healing and sustaining energy.

In recognizing this need, REACH worked with the project consultant to shift the focus to creating unstructured Black spaces for connection, professional development, and personal and nonprofit growth. Although the leaders

found value in all offerings, they cited the connection component as most important to their personal growth and health as Black leaders. Leaders noted that the option for unprogrammed space is often not supported because it doesn't align with conventional, White-dominant mental models about "work." Several leaders emphasized the importance of providing space exclusive to Black leaders so that they can experience safety and affirmation of shared experience.
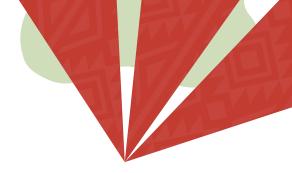
Learning What Worked, What Needs Improvement

Participants gave a positive response to Centering Black Voices and reported that they found REACH's approach to be supportive of Black-led social change and reparative philanthropy. They did note, however, opportunities for continued growth. Reflecting on experiences with philanthropy, Black leaders shared perceptions that can undermine trust and program success. Challenges cited include:

- Funders exert more control and scrutiny of the vision, priorities, strategies, budget, and operations of Black-led organizations.

- Black-led organizations experience chronic underfunding and irregular short-term funding more often than other organizations do.

- Capacity-building offerings often do not fit the needs or culture of the nonprofit organization.

- Funders frequently approach Black-led organizations with deficit and "savior" mindsets.

- Black leaders often are excluded from nonprofit resources and networks and direct access to funders.

- Demands on leaders' time are made without consideration of the cost to the organization. Examples included "get to know you" and "let me pick your brain" meetings; requests to speak or represent the foundation in ways that feel like tokenism; and requests to respond to surveys, studies, and landscape scans.

More specifically for REACH, key takeaways from participants on areas for improvement include:

- There were suggestions and offhand remarks made by foundation leaders that indicated there might be negative consequences if grantees did not participate in all events and trainings even though participation in capacity-building and gatherings was voluntary.

- The foundation needs to remain consistent in its commitment to racial equity. Participants have experienced some funders walking away from their commitments after a time and reverting to former practices.

"I've been asked many times by a foundation how it could do better by the Black community. This is the first time I felt like a foundation actually listened."

Centering Black Voices participant

These suggestions, taken together, reinforce the need for REACH specifically, and philanthropy in general, to embed trust-based philanthropic practices at all levels of the organization. Given these experiences, it was not a surprise that some Black leaders reported skepticism initially about REACH's intentions and commitment.

In the final focus groups and interviews, leaders reflected that the structure of the initiative overall (i.e., the genuine opportunity to provide feedback and shape the approach) and the respectful way that the REACH team and consultants approached the work could serve as a model for REACH's grantmaking efforts beyond this pilot program.

Influencing Other Philanthropic Partners

When asked what else REACH could be doing to advance Black-led social change in its stated aim to advance racial equity, participants requested that REACH—both as an institution and as individual staff and board members— use its voice and connections to influence the philanthropic field. Participants suggested REACH share its approach to creating safe spaces for Black leaders to discuss their experiences with philanthropy, and to share REACH's theory of change and capacity-building model to encourage other funders to alter their culture and grantmaking practices. Participants emphasized the importance of listening in building trust with foundations.

Implementing Lessons Learned

The lessons gained from the Centering Black Voices pilot have propelled several changes to REACH's grantmaking, investment, and governance practices since the program concluded in December 2022. REACH invited some of the pilot participants to become part of its core operating partner grants portfolio, providing them access to renewable, unrestricted funding on an annual basis.

REACH continues to sponsor gatherings, workshops, and learning opportunities—extending them to all Black-led nonprofits instead of exclusively to grantees. This approach creates a dynamic and expanding network of Black nonprofit leaders in the Kansas City area.

In 2023, we introduced a consultant-on-loan program to provide Black-led and Black-serving organizations access to Centering Black Voices Core Consultants, which is a group of Black consultants and subject matter experts. The consultants offer specific expertise in nonprofit capacity and governance functions such as strategy, fund development, marketing and communications, learning and evaluation, legal, and accounting. The consultants expand the reach of our foundation and provide an opportunity for REACH to engage with Black-led nonprofits with which we had no prior relationship.

Additional actions taken in 2023 further convey our stated commitment to improve racial equity in the Kansas City region:

- After a year of intentional learning and reflection, the REACH Board of Directors developed a document titled *Racial Equity Narrative* that makes clear the foundation's position on racism's harmful effects on health outcomes. It acknowledges REACH's past role in philanthropic redlining and our ongoing commitment to restorative philanthropy moving forward.

- The **Rapid REACH Equity Fund** is a new microgrant funding opportunity for small-budget, Black- and Brown-led organizations whose goals align with ours. This funding mechanism streamlines the application process and turnaround time to meet operating needs for organizations serving Black and Brown community members, immigrants, refugees, and rural communities.

- An **equity dashboard** is now in place for the REACH Board of Directors to track equity metrics in grantmaking and programmatic staff activities to better inform its governance and community investment decisions. The dashboard visualizes information and holds the foundation more accountable to its commitments.

Each of these developments is intended to demonstrate REACH's authentic commitment to sustaining the valuable lessons of the Centering Black Voices pilot program. REACH is committed to sustaining its efforts to listen to, elevate, and amplify Black voices in pursuit of advancing racial equity and eliminating health disparities.

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